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FROM A CERTAIN POINT OF VIEW: SENSORY PHENOMENOLOGICAL ENVISIONINGS OF RUNNING SPACE AND PLACE

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From a certain point of view: sensory phenomenological envisionings of running space and place

Introduction

The precise ways in which we go shopping, lace our boots, make coffee, drive to work, or take the dog for a walk - all constitute the kind of mundane, repetitive, social actions that are often taken for granted in much social theory, leaving it under-analyzed and under-theorized. In contrast, ethnographers and theorists working within the traditions of the sociology of the mundane and phenomenological sociology have highlighted the importance of subjecting to detailed, rigorous and sustained analysis the taken-for-granted, everyday embodied practices of social life (Schütz 1967). Employing insights derived from sociological phenomenology, this article draws upon recent work in the sociology of the senses, in order to investigate a particular, mundane and embodied social practice, that of training for distance running in specific places, our favoured running routes. As has been highlighted (see for example, Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007; Allen-Collinson 2009), despite a growing body of ethnographic studies of particular sports, relatively little analytic attention has been devoted to the actual, concrete practices of doing sporting activity, although a corpus of phenomenologically inspired research on sport and physical activity embodiment has, in recent years, begun to develop (e.g. Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2007, Chisholm 2008, Allen-Collinson 2009, 2011a, 2011b, Crust et al. 2011, Clegg and Butryn 2012, Sparkes and Smith 2012). We are therefore interested in examining in-depth some of the subcultural ways of seeing that runners employ, refined over time and place, and brought into play effectively to accomplish training in the terrain of "running space". Currently, there is scant sociological literature that analyzes in depth the ways in which people engage sensorially in sporting, leisure, and occupational spaces (e.g. Hindmarsh and Heath 2000, Wolkowitz 2006, Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009).

Employing data from a 2-year collaborative autoethnographic project on distance running, we set out to mark the mundane activity of running, primarily in relation to the

visual dimension, but also acknowledging the inter-relatedness and multi-modality of sensory lived experience. Our aim in this article is to subject to analysis a particular subcultural way of looking, a kind of distance-running vision, situated and experienced in specific contexts. Here we focus upon just one of our favored running routes as a sensuous ethnographic site: a run to and around an urban park in a medium-sized English town. This vision, developed and refined over time and specific place, becomes incorporated into our running bodies. One of the great challenges to us as ethnographers (particularly as autoethnographers) and sociological phenomenologists has been the exhortation to make strange and wondrous the taken-for-granted, to see with fresh eyes the mundane things of everyday life. This is what we attempt here, in examining the visual dimension of our everyday training routines for distance running in the particular social space of our training routes. Adopting the phenomenological attitude requires us to engage in *epochē* or bracketing, the temporary suspension of the “natural attitude”, our taken-for-granted assumptions and preconceptions surrounding a particular phenomenon or phenomena. As Husserl (1970, 76) exhorted, we seek to place in question, “hitherto existing convictions, which forbids in advance any judgmental use of them, forbids taking any position as to their validity or invalidity”. As sociologists, and highly cognizant of the importance of social-structural and contextual location, we fully acknowledge the inevitability of the partialness of such bracketing.

In order to address our aim, the article is structured as follows. We first address conceptualizations of space and place, before considering the sociology of the senses generally, and the visual sense specifically. We then portray the research project from which the autoethnographic data are drawn. These data are then presented within our analytical frame, cohering around the three key themes of visualizing space and place: 1) hazardous places; 2) performance places; and 3) the time-space-place nexus.

Space and Place

Theoretically-speaking, it is possible to categorize our training routes as a series of social places. In order for the physical, material “spaces” through which we run to become

"places", they must be filled by events, objects, representations and above all meanings, according to Gieryn (2000). Otherwise, it is argued, spaces remain entities that are solely geometric and abstract (Hilliar and Hanson 1984). Hence, making space into place is a fundamentally cultural and social activity. It therefore follows that places have their own unique location in space, display physical features that are "natural" (e.g. sand, rock, grass, trees) and/or artificial in terms of being human-made (concrete, brick, tarmac, glass) and are invested with specific meanings. What constitutes the "natural" is of course highly debatable and variable. Clayton and Opatow (2003, 6), for example, use the term "natural environment" in relation to: "environments in which the influence of humans is minimal or non-obvious, to living components of that environment (such as trees...), and to non-animate natural environmental features". We would add, however, that what is conceptualized as "natural", "living", and "non-animate" is also highly culture- and context-dependent. For example, in "Western" science, rocks are classed as mineral and deemed to be non-animate, but in Pagan cosmology rocks are living things imbued with spiritual energy. What is deemed to be "natural" by one person, for example, an urban park, for another is highly artificial and "man-made".

Once sense-making and meaning-making have occurred, places are also imagined, interpreted, narrated, felt, perceived and understood (Soja 1996). Devoid of these elements, place becomes substantively and analytically destroyed (Thrift 1996) and transformed back into solely geographical space (Gieryn 2000). As Gieryn (2000, 472) further notes of places: "Foremost, perhaps is pragmatic utility: people identify as places those spots they go to for some particular purpose or function". In the case at hand, a combined sequence of both natural and social phenomena constitutes for us a particular running route. Habitually running such training routes has produced in us a strong sense of place, which involves our ascription of certain qualities to the amalgam of material and social features present within "the route" (Gieryn 2000). As Crabtree (2000, 2) notes, "spaces and places consist of intelligible or meaningful material arrangements which are tied to the performance of particular activities"; in our case

linked to the performed activity of distance running. Here, we seek to portray the visual “performance” involved in traversing particular training routes and the interactional communication of that performance between us as training partners. The sensuous elements of place are key for phenomenology, for as Grasseni (2009, 8) highlights, the concept of place: “must be considered not only as a mental or social construct but as the sensuous experience of being in space and time”. Just as the body is the standpoint for perception, as Merleau-Ponty (1960) vividly portrays, the body is a body-in-place. Given the salient role of the sensuous in the experience of lived space, we now turn to consider the emerging field of the sociology of the senses in general, and the visual in particular.

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The Analysis

In this article we have chosen to focus upon three key themes that emerged as particularly salient during data analysis. We should explain that the project was not initiated or designed originally as a sensory autoethnographic study, but rather the sensory dimension emerged during subsequent data analysis as being key to our lived experience of running. These themes cohere around visualization of space and place in relation to: 1) hazardous places; 2) performance places; and 3) the time, space and place nexus. These concerns, as the forthcoming analysis will indicate, are closely interwoven and overlapping, but for analytic purposes we have attempted to disentangle their inter-related strands.

Visualizing Hazardous Places

Serious distance running is, for those unfamiliar with its routines, a highly repetitive and punishing activity, one which demands of its practitioners both high volume and high intensity of training. Our biographies of running stretch over 27 and 45 years respectively, involving training 6 or 7 days a week, sometimes twice daily during our most competitive years. We have backgrounds in competitive athletics involving distances from the marathon to 5 miles. Now in our 50s and 60s respectively, under the UK system we are firmly categorised as “veteran” runners, and our current training regimes are somewhat gentler than in our youth, given the need to protect our bodies from the rigours of joint-pounding that distance running inevitably entails. One of the results of such a demanding physical regime is that, in common with other athletes, runners become sensitised to injury as an ever-present possibility and threat, generated by the heavy, repetitive physical demands on the body. Overuse injury is a constant danger. Compounding this understanding is an awareness that out there in public places lurk other kinds of dangers, also likely to provoke injury, necessitating a vigilant monitoring of the environment in order to identify these and whenever possible take avoidance action.

Whilst we are nowadays primarily off-road runners (preferring to run on grass whenever possible in order to protect ravaged knees) we are nevertheless obliged to run on road on a regular and frequent basis. For runners, nearly all urban road routes contain potentially hazardous and injurious features, such as fast-flowing traffic, major road junctions, roundabouts, and concealed driveways, where hazards from vehicles are considerable, necessitating a high degree of visual (and aural) surveillance as the runner approaches these at relative speed; for example:

J. and I are charging down a relatively steep hill on the pavement, quads (quadriceps muscles) taking the strain as we concentrate on trying to steady our momentum, and also to protect sensitive knees... I'm slightly ahead, looking into the middle distance to gauge how far the downhill section will last... when suddenly, without warning, I'm aware via my runner's peripheral vision that out of a concealed drive-way to my right is suddenly appearing the sleek, hard, glistening bonnet of an expensive, family saloon car! I jam on the anchors, flinging my outstretched arms against the body of the car in a desperate attempt to stop my hurtling body, wrenching and jarring my shoulders with the impact of the force... Alarmed by the noise, the driver turns to see me squashed against his passenger side window as he continues to drive out on to the pavement towards the road, and then breaks forcibly. But I don't want to stop to engage in conversation or even to accept what looks about to be a proffered apology ... my momentum – and an adrenalin rush - keeps me hurtling forward, I'm already looking ahead to the next section of pavement, scanning for other precipitous exits from driveways...

(Log 2)

Some routes are problematic due not to vehicle hazards, but rather to their usage by human and animal traffic. For example, when training in our urban park, there is an underpass joining two sides of the park, which has steep slopes to either side before descending into a dark, dank and fetid tunnel. Narrow, badly lit and with poor visibility,

passing through this underpass demands of the runner constant visual alertness (not to mention olfactory stoicism) and monitoring, so as to avoid collision with speeding cyclists, parents and prams, teetering toddlers, lounging groups of adolescents, and roaming, unpredictable dogs. The latter, particularly when of large size, constitute a perennial hazard for which we watch out, in order to avoid as far as possible the following kind of incident:

The path at the bottom of the park is narrow and I espy a woman (dog-walker) approaching with a narky-looking Jack Russell terrier tugging against its lead. So, based on previous experience I slow right down to barely a shuffle so as not provoke the thing. To no avail, for as I pass the creature with a snarl seizes my left foot in its mouth and proceeds to try to bite! With barely repressed anger, I tell her to: 'pull it off or I will damage it'. She eventually does so, making the usual bleated excuse that 'he is not normally aggressive', as if somehow it were my fault that her dog has attacked. I give a weary look and run on with sore foot and a hole in a new pair of expensive training flats. (Log 1)

Other sections of our favored route harbor dangers that become activated only when traversed repeatedly and habitually, and a form of retrospective vision is required to identify these:

I've been getting soreness in my shins. I guess the start of what is usually called "shin splints". We are trying to identify why this might be happening, thinking about how we have been training lately. As we mentally rehearse some of our recent routes, we realise that we've been using one road route to P... park a lot and it's got a big camber on it for a large section, which seems to impact adversely upon my gait. We've made a decision to knock that route

in the head for a bit and review whether over a week the soreness disappears. It's a nice route, but not one to run a lot. (Log 1).

Other potentially problematic features for which we keep open a scanning, monitoring eye *en route* include, for example: tree roots bulging out on to the parkland paths, holes and divots slyly disguised by grass or snow, slippery surfaces (mud, frost- or dew-laden grass), and the occasional potentially lethal hazard:

Either ascending or descending the slope with railings down one side, we always try to remember to be cautious. The slope ends with a lead-in to a very small path between the railings and bushes; it's a really tight squeeze much of the year, in order to wriggle even a runner's slight body through. Once on the path itself, about a foot out stands a jagged, broken-off piece of railing, jutting up. We have tried on several occasions to extract it, but to no avail, it will not shift. It's a danger point every time we run that way, in both directions of traversing the route, but more so going down. So it's become a habitual practice when running solo to mutter internally "mind the spike", and when running together the lead person will shout "spike!" on espying the offending thing. (Log 2)

Some hazards are visible differentially according to season or time of day. There are "natural" features such as pine cones (perfectly configured for twisting ankles) or deep ruts caused by cyclists or by ice and rain. Other human-produced hazards include the dubious use of certain more secluded areas of our park for the (non-safe) disposal of needles by local drug users. Additionally, the spring and summer months bring golfers out in force on to "our" park, as part of the grassed parkland is devoted to a small-scale, pay-as-you-play golf course, which harbors its own hazards, particularly when groups of teenagers head out on to the course in spring and summer:

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